

Aberystwyth University

Maybe we will understand it once we've made it...

Banham, Simon

Published in:
Theatre and Performance Design

DOI:
[10.1080/23322551.2015.1024951](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2015.1024951)

Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):

Banham, S. (2015). Maybe we will understand it once we've made it.... *Theatre and Performance Design*, 1(1-2), 94-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2015.1024951>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Maybe we will understand it once we've made it...

A hidden dialogue: initiated by conversations and drawings, developed through production and responded to 3 years later; revealing more and less than we thought.

In 2011 Quarantine¹ made *Entitled*²

We said: "*Entitled* explores hope, privilege and disappointment – and the things we do to try to make our life complete. It ends before it even gets started. "

...and I subsequently wrote: 'it began as an exploration of scenographic purpose and presence, seeking to provoke, and yet also to elude, conclusive interpretations, an investigation into how we can read and construct scenography in our 'mind's eye'.

Structurally it involved the formal enactment of a 'real' *get-in* and a *get-out*, the usually hidden choreography of transforming a theatre, inhabiting it with a constructed place for performance and then returning it back again to an empty space.

But this only tells part of the story.

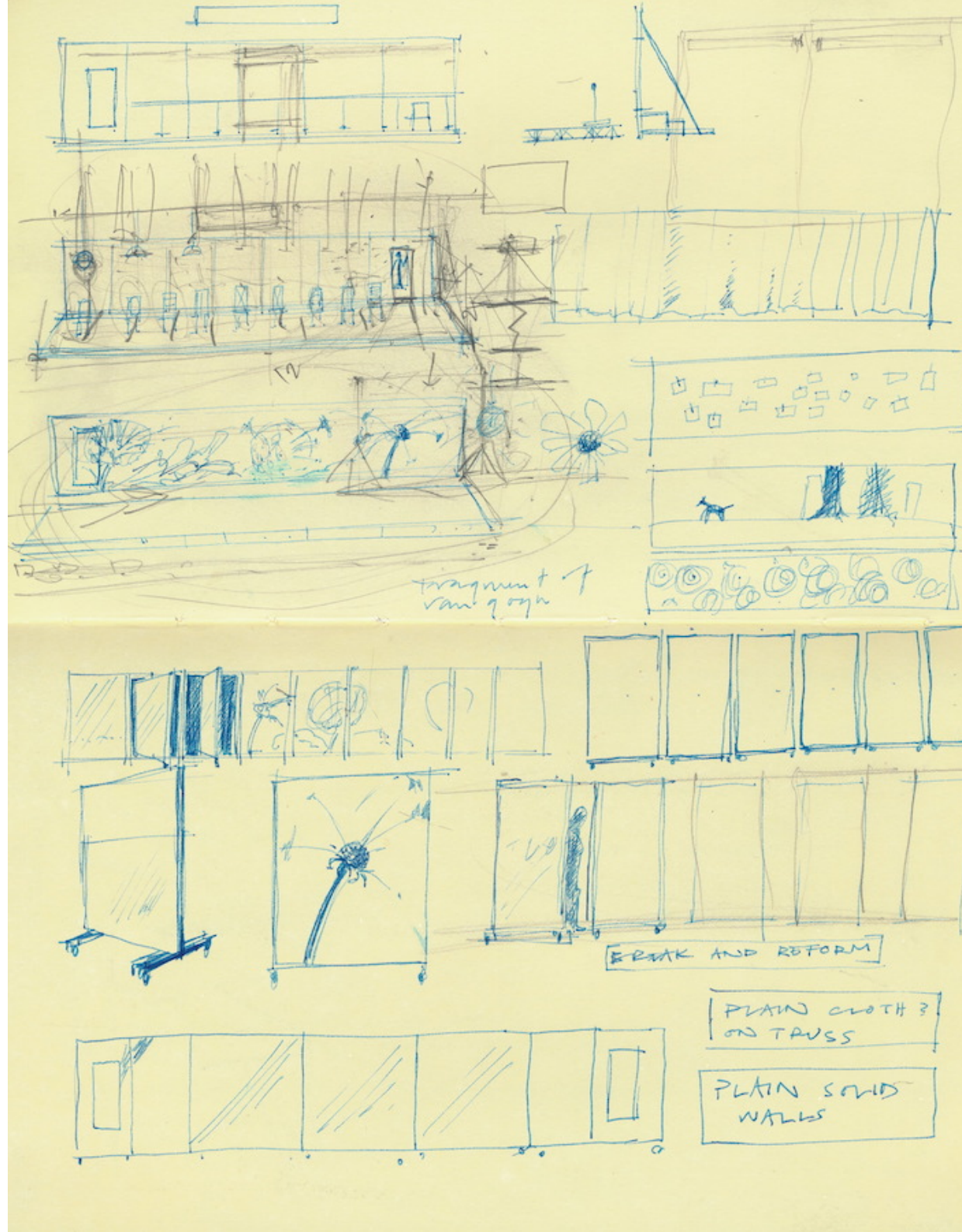
What follows are some of my thoughts in the form of notes and drawings culled from sketchbooks during the immediate process of making this piece of theatre. These drawings and scribbled questions (not intended to be seen by anyone else) are evidence of the search, not for an answer, but for the next question.

I've invited Richard, the director, to offer a considered reflection on these previously unseen notes, a dialogue separated by 3 years and informed by the performances of *Entitled* and the work we continue to make together as Quarantine.

I have resisted the great temptation to respond to his words, in the hope that any "what I meant was..." may be found in the drawings and photographs that accompany our words and in your own responses to these.

Quarantine's work is driven by asking questions (in the search for more questions?) and dialogue is always what makes the work interesting. In these pages, perhaps there is room between the drawings, the archived photographs, the questions and the responses for you to enter the dialogue, to give *Entitled* a different manifestation, and re-create the event in your 'mind's eye'.

Simon Banham



Simon (2011)

At the heart [of the piece] is there denial or affirmation? [1]

Drawing attention to the space that we [audience and performer] are sharing [but also]... suggesting another location either physical or emotional? reinforcing that shared space, the here and the now, [but it exists] simultaneously with a then and a there. [2]

How to create the scenography for a get in and get out

Question - of what? and why? [3]

What to put in the space when there is no reason to put anything in? [4]

We can't begin to choreograph the piece until we've created the set so it [the scenography] must author the show; it has to become the 'text' to drive the development of the piece through time. [5]

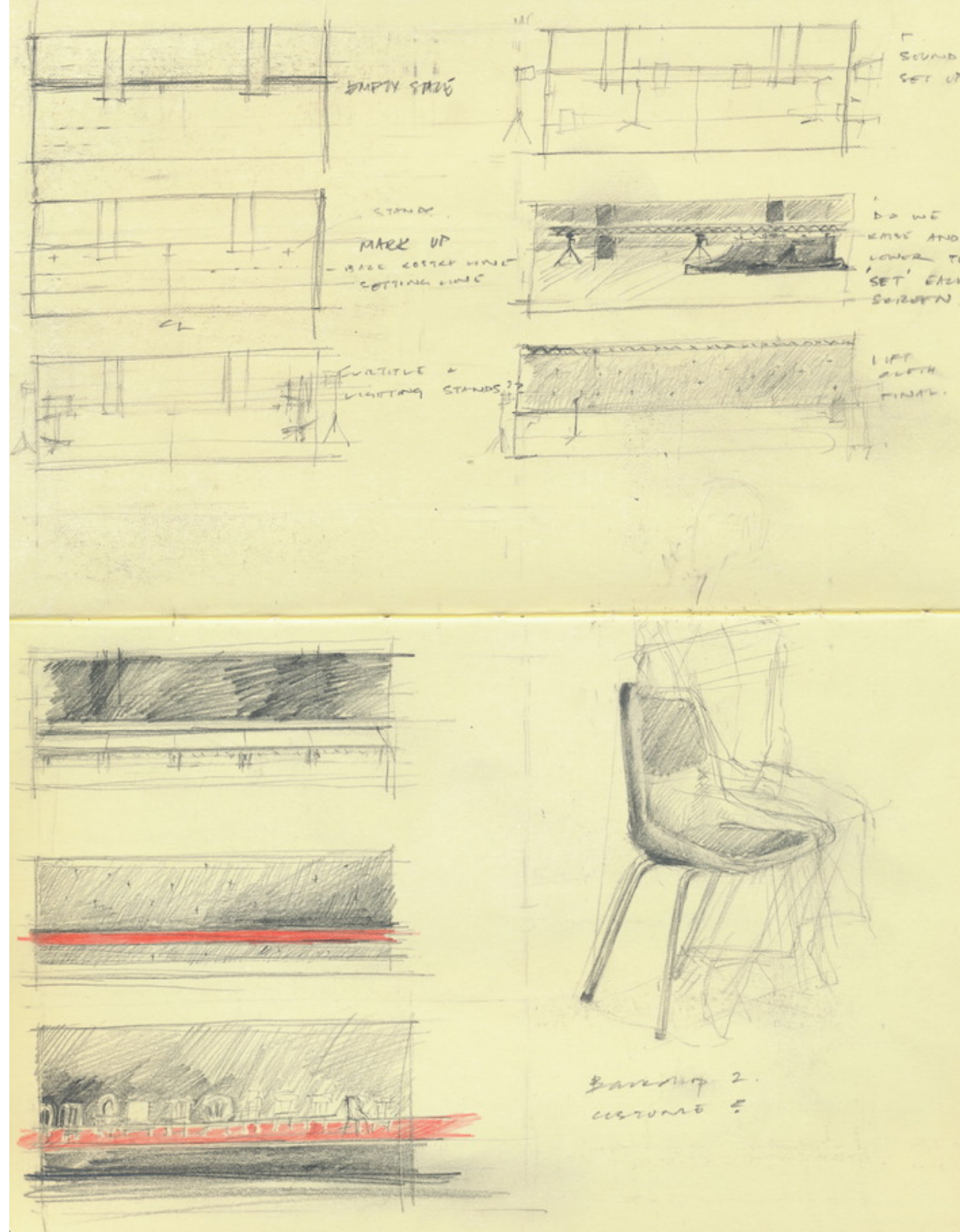
It has to go up, it has to come down, there are 3 people to do this, and it has to fit in a van to travel abroad. [6]

Everything has to be in the rehearsal space before we can make the show. We need the full 'cast' to be present. [7]

We have to work backwards. [8]

Everything needs to be in process, there is a rhythm, a cycle in which it [the space] is always becoming something else, but we can look into that process at any moment and it should always 'be' something for that one moment. [9]

It's a series of 1st nights... [10]



If the goal has value it's more compelling, but the activity is 'the thing' - it's the process not the goal but the process is enhanced if the goal has greater value. [11]

The thing I have imagined may never occur or it may change shape, it will become many different shows in many peoples' heads. [12]

Recreating the rehearsal room, the moment/process of creation; this is where this show came from. [13]

The star cloth becomes 'a passing thought' as does the mirror ball. [14]

Full of theatrical possibilities remembered/aspired to, of unfolding possibilities, of biographical elements. [15]

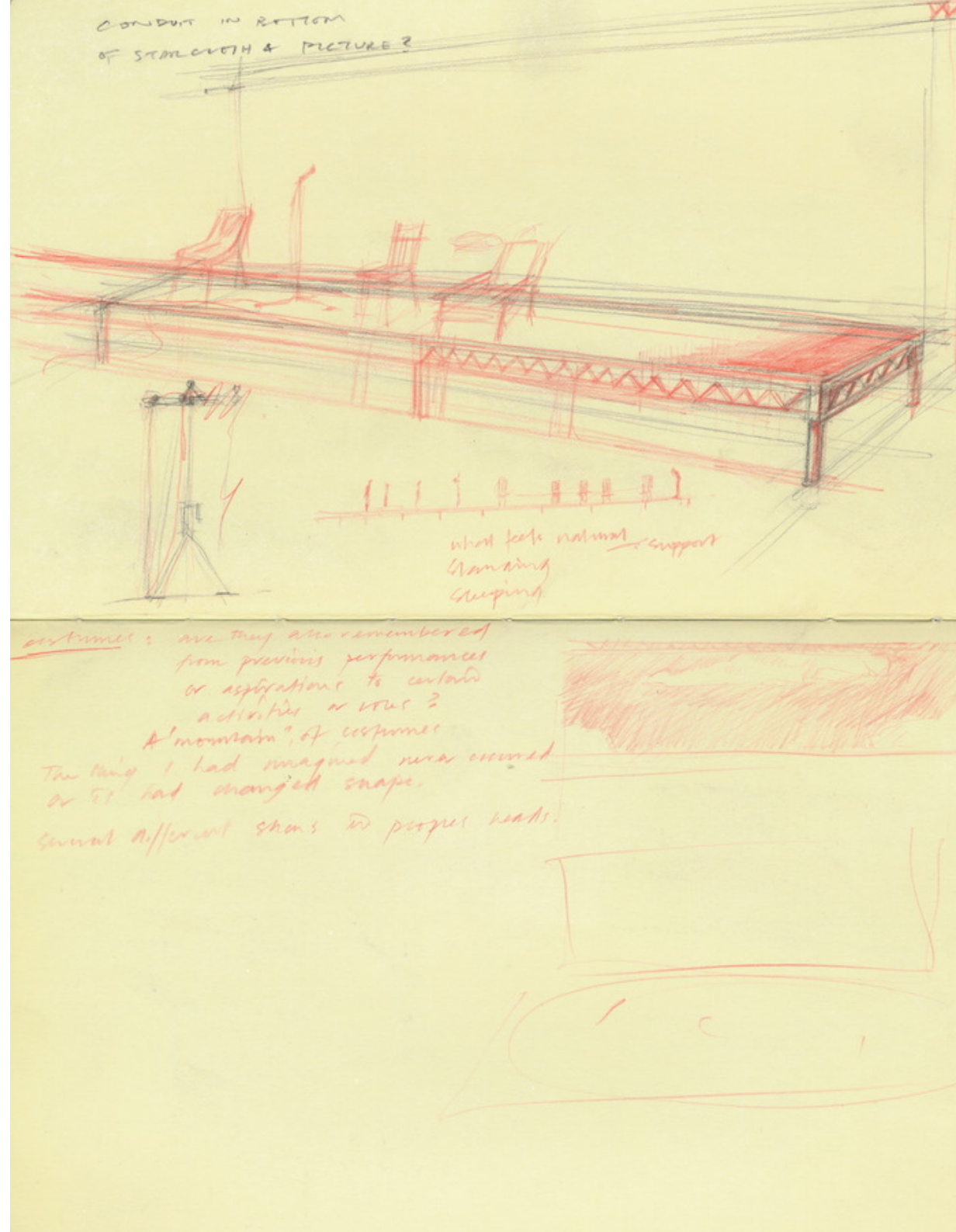
Constructing circumstances to:
invite an audience into a conversation,
create a place for debate,
build a garden.... [16]

A moment of dance might be what we aspire to (but never see), practiced during the 'get in'? [17]

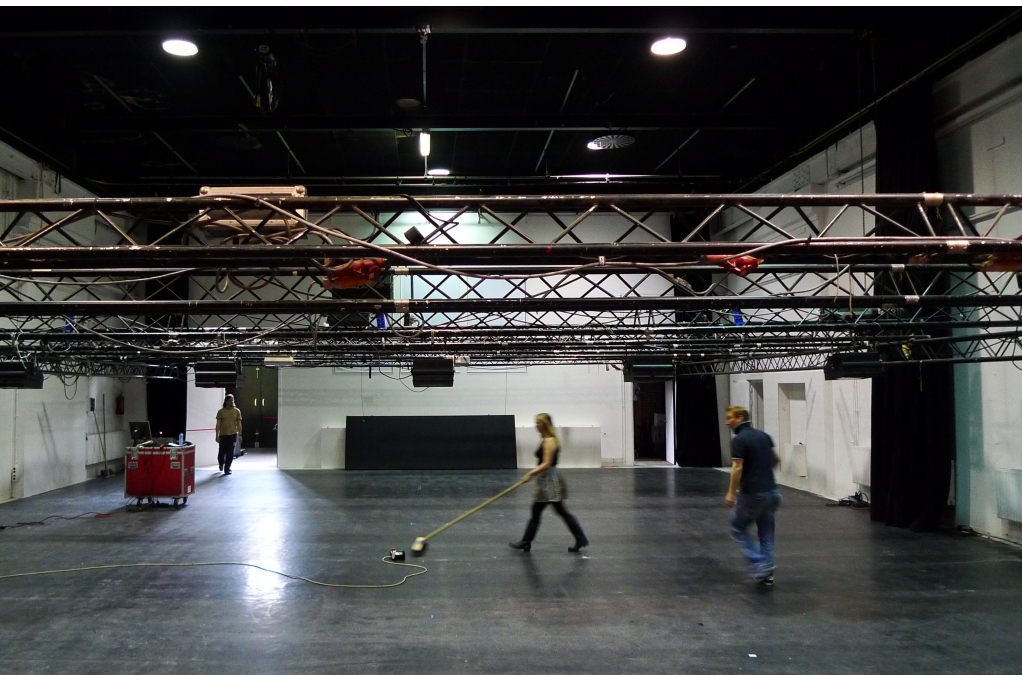
Star cloth or 'star cloth' dresses? [18]

Costumes: are they also remembered from previous performances or might they be aspirations to certain activities or roles?
Should there be 'a mountain' of costumes to select from? [19]

Work that inhabits gaps/ is about transitions/ what happens in-between
This pause is left undefined? [20]



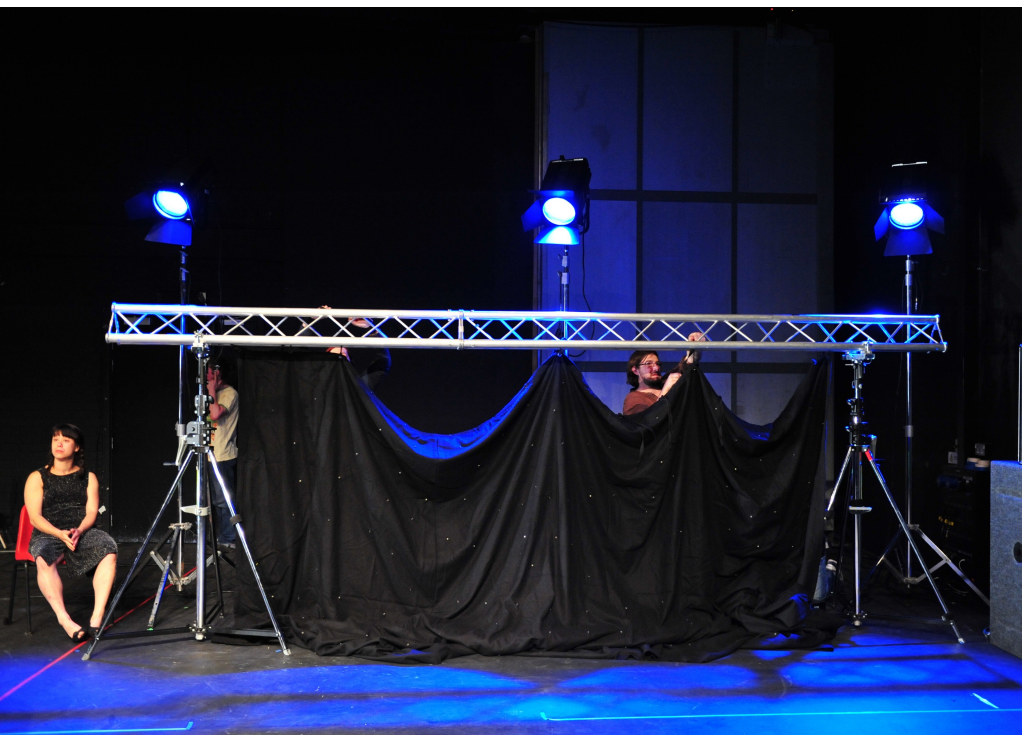
Richard (2014)



[1] There's a demonstration of what happens in these situations and an explanation by those involved about what they do, what they've done and what they might do in the future. I'm not sure it denies or affirms anything more or less than any other performance of a piece of theatre....

[2] Yes maybe. More simpl(isticall)y perhaps we're showing and talking about what normally happens before and after you arrive in the theatre, inverting the relationship between what's usually hidden and perhaps imagined with that which is exposed. This applies both to the exposure of the technicians labour and what the performers share – their personal histories, their insecurities, their thoughts about their future beyond this performance.

[3] We went round and round in circles about this question during the making of *Entitled*, talking about what is the show that we never see. It's simple. There isn't one. The piece is what we witness. What we might imagine it leads towards or suggests is something else entirely - I know nothing about what the spectator invents for themselves, unless they happen to tell me later. The scenography – in some ways here, appropriately, very much a 'set' of objects or elements (or at least the promise of one) – is for the thing that we're watching. Nothing else exists. The material and the scenography may appear somehow to exist in preparation for something else but in fact each and every element serves the moment in which it is used or foregrounded. For me this is crucial – that our preparations for and expectations of a life to be lived at some unknown point in the future are how we spend our present time. I think that we know that this particular version of a future might never arrive. And if it does, we might decide to live it differently, to make a different environment to do it in – implying a constant state of change, of becoming, of course.



[4] There are better reasons than most I reckon. It's led by function. We need lights to be seen by and sound equipment to play the music to practice the dances to and a set to build and take away at the end so that we can show what technicians normally do in a theatre. This is where it gets interesting. Theron Schmidt said of *Entitled* that "*the frame of the theatre produces such labour as fabrication, as mimetic, as less concrete than it may appear.*"³ He's right of course. But there's an *and*. *And* the technicians are doing something as well as the representation of labour. They're also really working hard, breaking a sweat, being expert, installing the equipment and building the set that is needed for this show called *Entitled*. They're both showing us what technicians do and doing what technicians do at the same time.



[5] This was something we didn't predict as we were developing the piece. All the material we made was contingent on what the technicians introduced into the space. It's the opposite way round to the usual process – where we're mostly led by the material we're devising, what might it need scenographically. Although we're also well used to dealing with scenography as provocation for making material (often as a starting frame), in *Entitled* that relationship was extended. We found that we couldn't make anything unless we knew what the technicians needed to set up next – they have a setting order that is dictated both by logic, convention and the time it takes. The measuring of the space is followed by the mark-up, which is followed by installing and checking the sound, lighting and video equipment. Then of course a floor has to go in before a wall can go up. So although you and I had to work backwards in some ways from the "finished" environment we wanted to create, in rehearsal we needed to respond element by element to what was being introduced, what it provoked and the limits it described. This was fascinating – but we hadn't realised it in advance, so there was an hiatus in rehearsal until we could actually introduce the physical elements. Not only so that the other performers could make material in response to them, but also so that the necessity of the technicians labour – the time it took, the effort and expertise involved – could be integrated into each section.

[6] The usual limitations.

[7] See [5] above.

[8] Ditto.

[9] This is the success of the scenography for *Entitled*. I doubt that anybody is aware of just how complicated it was to arrive at this apparently simple set of elements that allowed us to do that.

[10] I think it's closer to a series of technical rehearsals if anything. I remember the tech at the Royal Exchange in Manchester where, inevitably, we were still very much making the show, and, even more so than usual there was an absolute blurring, sometimes an utter confusion, between what we were doing in private in the tech and what we were making to present in public.

[11] "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." ⁴.....and all that jazz.....

[12] Yes.

[13] Only because I've been banging on for ages about having that yellow curtain from the Royal Exchange's rehearsal room in a show. Please.





[14] For me, it's something for the technicians to put up; it's a source of light; a nice backdrop for a dance; something that belongs to "proper" theatre in a kind of clichéd way; the night sky; heaven; whatever anybody else looking at it makes of it. Sometimes one of those things, sometimes others, mostly I probably don't even think about it – it's the next thing that comes on.

[15] Yes.

[16] We ended up not really doing that. Well – perhaps started out doing it, in the early performances, but we became more interested and satisfied I think by the implied invitation that hung there somehow rather than that which elicited a brief active response. You answered in your head rather than feel like you really needed to get up and do something in order to make it complete. More interesting perhaps was the openness of Fiona's final question at the end of her text about asking herself questions about not having children and mortality:

"It was summed up when Fiona Wright pondered out-loud something we sometimes all wonder: "Is my life worthwhile?" and a member of the audience felt compelled to intervene with the words: "I want to kiss you."⁵

[17] Maybe. I can't remember. It's what happens.

[18] You don't really expect me to remember do you? You know me better than that.

[19]

[20] It's a very full, heavily pregnant pause. Not an active discussion perhaps like the Q&A halfway through *Susan & Darren*,⁶ nor the shared telling of the history of the world (with ice-cream) with the audience in the "interval" during *Make-believe*.⁷ But perhaps it's a more confident pause. More willing to not steer the thinking.



¹ Quarantine was set up in 1998 by artists Simon Banham, Richard Gregory and Renny O'Shea to make theatre, performance and other public events. We make original work with and about the people who are in it – collaborating with a shifting constellation of highly skilled artists and performers and with people who have never done anything like this before. Whatever form it takes, our work begins and ends with the people in the room. In a variety of ways, we try to create the circumstances for a conversation between strangers...

Quarantine creates theatre, performance and other public events. Our work is about the here and now. In its form, content and process of creation, it examines the world around us. Past projects have included shared meals, family parties and a journey in the dark for one person at a time - as well as performances on stage, watched by audiences in seats.

www.qtine.com

² Theron Schmidt (2013): Troublesome Professionals: On the speculative reality of theatrical labour, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 18:2, 15-26

³ T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" 1941

⁴ Lyn Gardner, Guardian review for *Entitled* <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/jul/13/entitled-review-manchester-royal-exchange>

⁵ *Susan & Darren*, Quarantine, 2006

⁶ *Make - believe*, Quarantine 2009